

Izzat : Historical Records and Iconography of Indian Cavalry Regiments 1750-2007

Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)*

The 17th of December 2008 marked the culmination of a long period of sustained research activity and intensive support of an important research project that had been undertaken under the aegis of the Maharana Pratap Chair of the United Service Institution Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (USI CAFHR). The subject of research was the iconography of Indian cavalry regiments in the armies of India from circa 1750 to present times, including Pakistan. Such a catalogue of insignia and accoutrements covering so wide a time-span and so many regiments has never before been attempted anywhere in the world. Furthermore, since the evolution of regimental iconography is incomplete without its historical context, the lineage, battle honours, ethnic composition, highest awards won, as well as the highlights from the respective regimental histories were included in the study and are published in this magnum opus compiled by Captain Ashok Nath (Retd), MA, FRGS. The handsomely produced book, which has been printed to international standards and published by the CAFHR, was released by a senior and distinguished cavalry officer, General VN Sharma, PVSM, AVSM, who retired as the Chief of the Army Staff in 1990.

Captain Ashok Nath was educated at St Stephen's College, Delhi and at the University of Stockholm in Sweden where he studied anthropology and history. He served as an officer in the Indian Army (73 Armoured Regiment) and left India for Europe in 1978. Elected fellow of the Royal Geographical Society for his study of the habitat of the snow leopard in Zaskar, he has travelled extensively in the regions of high Asia, and has been an organiser and a guest lecturer for the Military Historical Society study tours to India, Pakistan, Nepal and Burma. He is currently working on regimental identities, ethnicity, caste and 'martial race' in the Indian and Pakistan armies at the University of Stockholm. This is his first book, with others to follow on the iconography and history of the Indian Army's infantry, arms and services. Conflict history, habitat and ethnography of South Asia remain a major interest and his writings have appeared in various international journals and newspapers.

All professional armies look upon the regimental badge as an icon, worthy of respect and honour (Izzat) - a time-honoured word, understood by all ranks of the Indian Army and therefore also an appropriate title for this book.

There had long been a need for such a work especially since the Indian Army with its rich history lacked a study of its regimental badges. Although a detailed listing of all the regiments that have existed in the armies of India has been earlier compiled by Chris Kempton, a comprehensive catalogue of regimental iconography was till now absent from Indian Army historiography. In the case of the cavalry, over 300 different Indian cavalry units have been identified, several of them previously unknown. Some survive to the present times, but many have faded away. Thus, to cover a period of nearly three centuries was a formidable challenge, which the author has met with aplomb and produced a seminal work which will serve as a point of reference for historians for all times to come.

While the author had been collecting material and data on the subject for many years previously, the seeds of the project were sown following the visit to Sweden by Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar, PVSM, AVSM, Vrc, (Retd), Director of the USI. He is also an adviser to the Folke Bernadotte Academy in Sweden and it was on one of his visits there that he suggested that the author consolidate his findings into a book. Subsequently a fellowship given to the author by the USI made it possible for him to bring this work to fruition.

The book launch ceremony was well attended by senior USI members, officers of the cavalry fraternity and military history enthusiasts. It commenced with a welcome address by General Nambiar, in which he gave a brief background to the establishment of the CAFHR and its gradual evolution over the years. The Chairman of the Board of Management of the CAFHR, Lieutenant General VK Singh, PVSM (Retd) then took the proceedings forward. The chief guest, General VN Sharma, needed no introduction to the audience. The author was then introduced, and he gave an overview of the project and how it had progressed over the years.

Principal amongst those that he sought to thank for their moral and material contribution to the successful completion of the work were: the late John Gaylor an authority on British Army badges as well as the late Len Thomas, one time head boy of the Lawrence Military School, Lovedale. He gave particular thanks to Field Marshal Sir John Chapple GCB, CBE, DL, former Chief of Staff of the British Army - educated at Cambridge before joining the 2nd K.E.O. Gurkha Rifles. The Field Marshal generously allowed access to his splendid collection and private records. Many badges from his Indian Army collection appear in this book. The late Colonel Pyara Lal, AVSM and late Major General Samir Sinha, PVSM both former Directors of the USI were also thanked for their constant encouragement. The author noted that they would have been pleased that the work was being completed under a fellowship being provided by the USI CAFHR.

The support of the Major General Palit Military History Studies Trust was duly acknowledged, as were the staff at various museums and archives in the UK and India.

The compilation also includes a section on Pakistan Army Regiments. The author saw it fit to include a clarification as to why he deemed it fit to do so. His rationale was that the present Pakistan Army descends from those regiments that had been part of the Old Indian Army when partition took place. On the personal side, he was only met with kindness and hospitality for which he thanked the Rimcollian network of Pakistan.

The support provided by the USI CAFHR was duly acknowledged, as were a host of others whose names are duly

incorporated in the preface to the present volume.

The book was then released by the chief guest. In his remarks, General Sharma highlighted the requirement for such works to be undertaken and their importance to the professional soldier. He complimented the author for his painstaking research, and also placed on record his appreciation of the steps taken by the USI and the Service Headquarters in establishing the CAFHR for the purpose of encouraging the study of military history.

The function closed with a vote of thanks by the Secretary CAFHR. Noting the large number of members, particularly cavalry officers who had showed up to attend the function, the Secretary recalled the timeless anecdote about the young cavalry subaltern: A senior officer in days of yore asked him in a promotion exam, as to what, in his opinion, was the role of cavalry in a modern war? The classic reply was that he supposed it was “.... to lend Tone (or a touch of class) to what would otherwise be a mere vulgar brawl..”

The ceremony was followed by tea and refreshments being served at the ‘Pavilion’. The diehard cavalry officers were soon pouring over the display copy of the book and the room was reverberating with the sound of old cavaliers reminiscing about long forgotten skirmishes and the good old times in their respective regiments.

***Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)** is currently Secretary of the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research and Vice President of the Indian Military Historical Research Society, the UK.

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